

In search of the Badanga

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In November 1995, I was lucky enough to visit the Comoros – a little visited group of islands lying in the Indian Ocean midway between the African mainland and Madagascar. The archipelago supports about 20 currently accepted endemics, but with a total avian endemic taxa list of about 54. Most single island endemics occur on Grand Comoro although the eastern island of Anjouan is home to several. Amongst those endemic to Anjouan is perhaps the most enigmatic of all Comoran birds, the mysterious and elusive Badanga or Anjouan Scops Owl *Otus capnodes*.



Lac Dzilandze (Alan Lewis)



Rufous phase Anjouan Scops Owl *Otus capnodes*
(Alan Lewis)

The Anjouan Scops Owl was only rediscovered in 1992² and remains little known in life. It occurs only within areas of forest in the mountainous heart of the island and is considered endangered¹.

I arrived on Anjouan with Neil Bostock, Ashley Banwell and Jon Hornbuckle on the evening of 11 November 1995. The next morning local transport brought us to the small village of Dindi, where villagers had eventually showed Roger Safford the species

at roost. We had no such luck despite one valiant attempt by a local to entice the Badanga into view by hitting a number of trees with a large stick. After several hours walk from the village with local guides we arrived at the small crater lake of Lac Dzilandze, where we were to spend the night. Safford had heard what he believed to be the Badanga around the lake here.

As the evening sky darkened eerie whistles could be heard in steep forested patches around the lake. The call was that described by Safford as the suspected call of the Badanga – a drawn out whistle *peeooee* reminiscent of Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*. Calling around the lake soon became erratic and our spirits dropped. We headed for the nearest bird through dense secondary scrub. Playback of the call succeeded only in causing the bird(s) – probably a pair – to fly over, calling in the darkness. Five frustrating hours later the birds were proving as elusive as ever. Standing with the others I played the tape yet again. I looked up and just glimpsed a small dark shape fly over us. After a few hurried words with one of my companions, a torch was passed to me and the Badanga was in the beam!

For the next hour we were able to observe this rufous phase individual at close range, both resting and preening. Much to our astonishment it was joined for a few minutes by a grey phase bird – presumably the second bird of the pair.

Whilst we did not actually see the birds call, there is no doubt whatsoever that the *peeooee* call is that of the Anjouan Scops Owl as suspected by Safford. The rufous individual returned into view several times on playback of this call and once gave a loud call at very close range.

In my limited experience of the species, based on these observations, the bird seems particularly mobile for an *Otus* and rather unresponsive to playback. It is perhaps likely that we only had a dramatic response once we had reached the core of the territory. The birds were recorded as perching from 3–15 m (heard) from the ground and preferred to perch in thick cover. This latter point is in marked contrast to *Otus rutilus* of Madagascar which is so conspicuous by night, often perching in the open to call and hunt.

As detailed by Safford, the Badanga seems to be restricted to patches of primary montane forest on steep slopes. It seems unlikely that the population could exceed 100 pairs and may be much lower. Cultivation in some form is practised on increasingly

steep slopes and given the burgeoning population on the island there seems to be little hope for this bird in the long term, unless some form of protected area can be established.

Whatever the outlook for the species, owl fanatics will surely be drawn to the mountains of Anjouan to take up the challenge presented by this elusive bird. ☺

References

1. Collar, N.J., Crosby, M.J. and Stattersfield, A.J. 1994. *Birds to watch 2: the world list of threatened birds*. Cambridge: BirdLife International.
2. Safford, R.J. 1993. Rediscovery, taxonomy and conservation of the Anjouan Scops Owl *Otus capnodes*. *Bird Conservation International* 3:57–74.

Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla* in the Banc d'Arguin National Park, Mauritania: a new species for Africa

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The Banc d'Arguin National Park on the Mauritanian coast holds one of the largest concentrations of wintering waders in the world. The area is both relatively difficult to visit and unmonitored.

During a visit to the park from 6–10 January 1994 we observed a first winter Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*. It was found on the morning of the 7 January feeding with several hundred mixed calidrid sandpipers on the north side of the Iwik peninsula. The flock mainly comprised Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Little Stints *C. minuta* and Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* with smaller numbers of other waders.

After approximately 40 minutes a small wader, the size of a Little Stint, but heavier billed, marginally larger and plumper than the surrounding Little Stints with a short primary projection, was noticed. It also appeared slightly duller than most of the stints. Almost immediately the bird flew but it returned and landed less than ten metres away beside some roosting Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*. This allowed exceptional views in good light conditions, as it roosted.

The bird remained for about 20 minutes permitting a comprehensive description to be taken (summarised below) before it flew off when the flock was disturbed by a Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*. It was not seen again but the chances of relocating it amongst the thousands of waders was virtually nil.

Description

Structure

Appeared slightly larger and dumpier than the nearby Little Stints, but did not appear long legged as does Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*. Showed a shorter primary projection than surrounding Little Stints.

Bare parts

Bill: black, heavier than Little Stint being broader based and thicker and possibly slightly longer (being about twice the loral distance) bulbous tipped giving a very slightly decurved effect. The bill was not as long or decurved as Western Sandpiper.

Legs: black, distinct palmaria between middle and outer toes visible at close range, whilst sleeping.

Plumage

Head: grey crown with black streaking and grey ear coverts with darker smudgy lores. Noticeable white supercilium being broader in front of the eye.

Underparts: white with some faint streaking at the sides of the breast, this was confined to the sides and did not extend across the front of the breast.

Mantle: uniform pale grey with dark shaft streaks.

Wing coverts: pale grey with dark shaft streaks. A couple of very worn feathers retained from juvenile plumage showed pale edges and darker centres.